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SUBJECT: COSTA RICA: NEW MINISTER OF PUBLIC SECURITY DEL  
VECCHIO

REF: SAN JOSE 263

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. President Arias has appointed National Liberation Party legislator Janina Del Vecchio as the new Minister of Public Security. She took office on April 15, replacing Fernando Berrocal, who was dismissed on March 30 after making controversial remarks about possible FARC connections in Costa Rica. Although criticized for having no previous law enforcement experience, Del Vecchio possesses strong leadership credentials from her skillful handling of CAFTA legislation in the National Assembly and has the full backing of Arias, who had wanted to put a woman in the position. In her first public appearance (as Minister-designate), Del Vecchio told police graduates on April 10 that Costa Rica needed to be "tough on crime." She has softened that message in subsequent interviews, however, suggesting that the perception of the domestic security problem in Costa Rica is greater than reality. (We and leading GOCR law enforcement professionals disagree.) Charge and Emboffs will meet with Del Vecchio on April 23 to outline our law enforcement cooperation programs and to encourage the same close relationship we had developed with Berrocal. See bio info (para 13). END SUMMARY.

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MEET THE NEW BOSS

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¶2. (U) On April 3, four days after Minister of Public Security Fernando Berrocal resigned over the controversy surrounding his allegations of FARC ties to the Costa Rican political sector (reftel), President Arias named National Liberation Party (PLN) legislator Janina Del Vecchio as the new Minister of Public Security. Del Vecchio took charge of the Ministry on April 15.

¶3. (SBU) President Arias told us on April 1, during DAS Madison's recent visit to Costa Rica (septel), that he preferred to name a woman as the next Minister of Public Security. He had offered the job to Del Vecchio on March 31, the day after Berrocal resigned, but she did not accept until late on April 2. Del Vecchio made the president's short list primarily because of her determined and skillful handling of CAFTA legislation as Chair of the legislature's International Relations Committee and her loyalty and responsiveness to Arias. (Del Vecchio's committee sent the CAFTA ratification legislation to the Plenary for action in December 2006, the only completed legislative action on CAFTA until after it was ratified by referendum in October 2007.)

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LACK OF SECURITY EXPERIENCE QUESTIONED

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¶4. (U) Del Vecchio's lack of experience in security affairs has been highlighted by local media and "talking heads." For instance, a local TV station interviewed a mother whose son was recently murdered on the streets of San Jose. The mother questioned Del Vecchio's lack of law enforcement credentials and asked how a former school teacher could possibly be qualified to deal with violent crime.

¶5. (U) However, Del Vecchio would not be the first Minister to come into the job with little to no law enforcement experience. Berrocal himself had no previous experience, nor did current Vice President Laura Chinchilla when she was Minister of Public Security in the late 1990s. President Arias underlined her strengths in leadership, honesty, enthusiasm for her job, character, and loyalty to serve her country. With Del Vecchio's accession into Arias' Cabinet, there are now six women and 12 men in cabinet-level positions.

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TOUGH TALK, AT FIRST

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¶6. (U) In an interview with leading daily La Nacion on April 7, Del Vecchio acknowledged the difficulties that Costa Rica faced with the deteriorating domestic security situation and said she understood that improving security was now the number one issue with citizens. Highlighting the addition of nearly 1200 new police officers to the force in the coming weeks and days, Del Vecchio said she would continue with Berrocal's plan to put more officers on the street. She said the idea for successful policing was not only for cops to

walk the beat, but to talk to citizens and hear their needs and concerns. She added that laws must be strengthened and she would work with the Assembly to accomplish that. As Ambassador to Switzerland, Del Vecchio said she had observed the positive impact of strong criminal laws and respect for the law; this could be a model for Costa Rica.

¶7. (U) On April 10, during a graduation ceremony of new Costa Rican police officers, Del Vecchio (as minister-designate) gave a strong anti-crime speech, emphasizing the fight against narcotrafficking, TIP, sexual exploitation of women and children, and organized crime. She said she would support putting more resources into fighting the root causes of crime. Above all, she stressed, hung the challenge of addressing the public's fear of domestic insecurity in Costa Rica.

¶8. (U) In a brief televised address to the nation later the same day, President Arias highlighted how seriously he took the security situation and threw his full support behind Del Vecchio. He emphasized that she was capable of making tough decisions, and had unquestionable integrity. Arias asked the people to trust his decisions and to "trust in our women" (alluding to other high-profile women in his cabinet, such as VP, Minister of Justice and presidential hopeful Chinchilla). He said that Del Vecchio had "talent, but above all bravery."

¶9. (U) In interviews since taking office, however, Del Vecchio has questioned whether the domestic security problem is as bad as the public believes, and asserted that the perception is worse than the reality. She has also implied that there is little or no nexus between drug trafficking through Costa Rican territory and rising domestic crime. "The nation needs action and concrete decisions" she told the media at a press conference on April 15, but "we have no reason to be alarmed." The media (and some key law enforcement personnel, such as Judicial Police Director Jorge Rojas) were quick to point out that deteriorating crime statistics, and not perception, fueled the public's concerns.

## NEW MINISTER, NEW TEAM

¶10. (SBU) Del Vecchio's arrival has seen a number of seasoned security personnel depart, with all the changes not yet completed. Of the three vice ministers, Rafael Gutierrez (police issues) rendered his resignation, effective May 1. VM Gerardo Lascarez (counternarcotics issues and law enforcement liaison) has agreed to stay on until December, but might leave sooner. VM Ana Duran (government and immigration) will remain. Vice Minister of the Presidency for Security Issues, Jose Torres, will likely wear two hats, filling in for Gutierrez in the short term while remaining in his current position in his current ministry. Erick Lacayo (a long-time and excellent Embassy contact) will be the new head of the uniformed police. The current heads of the coast guard and air unit are expected to remain (which is also good news from our perspective).

## COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) One of Del Vecchio's first challenges will be the continuing saga of possible FARC ties to Costa Rica. The resolution (or lack thereof) of this issue, which cost Berrocal his job, could set the tone for her stewardship of the Ministry. However, the "bread and butter" issues on which the Costa Rican people will judge her will be the increase or decrease of violent crime, including carjackings, home invasions, murders and assaults.

¶12. (SBU) Although Del Vecchio has no previous law enforcement or security experience, her April 10 speech indicated that she would be "tough on crime" and not afraid to address the ills that undermine Costa Rica's image as a land of paradise. We hope so. Her later comments suggest she has much to learn about the true (and worsening) security situation here. As our Consul General puts it, "Costa Rica may not be dangerous when compared to the rest of the region but it is no longer safe." We anticipate that our current level of excellent cooperation with Costa Rican law enforcement entities will continue with Del Vecchio as

minister. We will meet with her on April 23 to engage on important bilateral security topics, including the long-pending CNIES agreement, the Merida Initiative, and the activities of the FARC in Costa Rica.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

¶13. (SBU) Janina Del Vecchio Ugalde was born April 4, 1946 in San Jose, Costa Rica. Before becoming Minister, she was a deputy (legislator) for Arias' National Liberation Party (PLN). Her previous jobs include: Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Costa Rica (UCR); Chief of Cabinet for the first Arias Administration (1986-90), Ambassador to Spain, the Vatican, Malta, and Switzerland; and Chairperson of the Geneva Chapter of the G-77. Del Vecchio is a Professor of Mathematics with post-graduate degrees in Education and Educational Management from UCR. During her tenure as a legislator, she was the President of the National Assembly's International Affairs Committee (equivalent to the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee and Senate Foreign Relations Committee). Del Vecchio is married to Jose Manuel Bouzon Cea (54 years old), a Spaniard, and has one son, Juan Carlos Hidalgo del Vecchio (43 years old), from her first marriage.

BRENNAN